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ABSTRACT

Well meaning parents and teachers often use children's play for the purposes of literacy and socialization. Yet, these attempts may deny play to children by subordinating play to some other concept. Evidence shows that even when parents play with their very young children they generally play games like shopping, cooking, and eating; whereas when the same children play with their siblings they are more likely to play monsters, killing, or going to the moon. Children's literature, fairy tales, and nursery rhymes have been bowdlerized on behalf of a more innocent childhood. Cinderella's sisters used to cut the toes off their feet to get them in the slipper, producing blood all over, and they were ultimately punished when ravens pecked their eyes out. These versions do not exist in The Golden Books. Social science textbooks on child development also fail to include children's folk play. This century has subsumed play to cravings for leisure, to idealizations of childhood, and to all those psychological processes that have come to be regarded as of first line importance. Play has been sanitized through identifying it with a variety of other "cleaner" human functions--exploration, mastery, problem solving, and imagination. Those who deny children adequate play opportunity may well be taking the zest out of childhood. (HOD)

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The The Denial of Play, Brian Sutton-Smith, University of Pennsylvania
The "Hot Housing of Children" Symposium, Please Touch Museum, Philadelphia, Oct 25-26.

I am here to talk about PLAY, so, unlike the symposium title mine is not "The Hot Housing of Children, so much so soon." It is instead: "The Cooling of Play: Too Little Too Late." My attitude to play will be much like my attitude to the Please Touch Museum. That is you only create a museum for Touching when you live in a world that is without touching or within a dark sea of Don't Touch. Surely to have to have a place for children to do their touching has to be a kind of madness. For me to have to come here to advocate play has to be likewise a kind of madness because it implies that there isn't any playing either out there in the black sea of Don't Touch.

But let me begin with an anecdote from the studies of British Psychologist Judy Dunn (1982). This one shows up our own remarkable parental ambivalence and readiness to subsume children's play to our own socialization purposes. Garry is a three year old and is playing with his Teddy Bear.

Garry: He's got to have a rest. He feels much better now, Teddy does. He's eating it up. He's gone to sleep now. He's got his pillow for his head. Night night.

Mother : Have you read him a story.

Garry: No, he doesn't want a story.

Mother: He doesn't want a story? Ooh, you have a story when you go to bed. Why don't you get your caterpillar book and read him, that?

Garry: He doesn't want a story. He's asleep now...Now he is sitting on the

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chair cause he's one of the three bears.

Mother : One of the three bears ? Where's their porridge ? Here's Goldilocks. Look.

Garry: This is...Goldilocks. She went for a walk. And sat down there. And went for a walk. And big father sees that (growls). And he went to bed with him. And he went to Goldilocks. And he...went in that bed. And it was too little for him so's he could go in it (growls). So Daddy Bear tried Baby Bear's . Now he's in Baby Bear's. Baby Bear's tired.

Who's this he says (growls). I'm going to wake her up. And he smacks little Ted. Waw waw waw. Smack smack..He doesn't want to go to bed anymore. He wants to go to the toilet. He's doing weewee on the floor.

Mother : He'd better not. Go and sit him on the potty.

Garry: He's done it. Naughty Bear...He's done weewee in his bed. He's weeing on the floor. He's weeing on the floor again. . He's done it again, and again and again. He's done it on the floor. He's done it on the sofa...There's father bear coming. And baby wakes up. Smack him. Smacked his father. And he goes and... And father says, That's my chair! (growls) And smack! Smack! Smack!"

In this example we might suggest that the mother's attempts to encourage literacy (The Three Bears) and socialize the child (the potty), end in failure at least within his play. And yet her behavior is often characteristic of well intended parents in our times. Marilyn Cochrane Smith at the University of Pennsylvania in her study of a teacher reading to Nursery School children found that the teacher spent most of her time apart from reading, using the book to teach the children and only about 20% dealing with the story itself (1984). Evidence also shows that even when parents play with their very young children they generally play games like

shopping, cooking and eating, whereas when the same children play with their siblings they are more likely to play monsters, killing or going to the moon (Dunn, 1985).

What I will contend here today is that these attempts to use children's play for their own socialization are but small scale examples of the much larger denial of play to children over these past several hundred years. Sometimes we deny play by excluding it from the available repertoires, sometimes we exclude play by subsumption, that is, by subordinating play to some other concept; and sometimes we deny it by sanitization, that is, by cleaning up the act.

DENIAL BY EXCLUSION.

I was recently in Toulouse, France for the Third World Conference of Rainbow Days. This is an organization of French and third world powers under the aegis of UNESCO, the aim of which is to preserve traditional games in the membership countries as one way of protecting the children of those countries from being absorbed totally in the infra structures of modern competitive sports,including the Olympics. For example: The New York Times, on Monday October 21, section B, Page 3, had a picture of 5 and 6 year old girls playing soccer at Sunquam Elementary School in Huntington, Long Island. The Candy Canes beat the Gum Drops 2-0 in the Pixie Division of the Huntington Soccer League. The idea of saving children from this kind of thing is a worthy aim but somewhat anomalous because so many traditional games are of a relatively brutal and crude nature. The Rabelaisian games of the middle ages are hardly suitable for most playgrounds and we have steadily excluded them from playgrounds during the past 100 years. Games in which dangerous stones or knives or sharp

pointed sticks are used as play implements are no longer with us. The very attitude to play in which those earlier players seemed to enjoy: watching pain, inflicting pain, or experiencing pain (some of which is captured in Breugel's famous painting ofChildrens Games, 1560),is no longer with us. Or putting aside even pain and brutality, consider the bawdy and sexual games of the middle ages in which young men and women of twelve to fourteen years danced around together taking turns at choosing each other, beating each other or pulling each other about in a robust and rollicking fashion. From these games partners could emerge to be married by the age of fifteen years. These Round Games, with names like Thread the Needle, The Lusty Wooer, Three Dukes a Riding, Sally Water, and The Farmer in the Dell, had their acts so cleaned up by church and parents in the hundreds of years to come that by the nineteenth century they were played almost entirely by girls as is still the case in some countries. You will find this account in the most recent work of Peter and Iona Opie published this year and titled The Singing Game (1985). I am making the argument that much that used to be normal play amongst children is no longer with us.

The point is made clearer when we realize that the same process has happened to children's literature, to fairy tales and to nursery rhymes. All have been bowdlerized on behalf of a more innocent childhood. Cinderella's sisters use to cut the toes off their feet to get them in the slipper producing blood all over; and they were ultimately punished by having ravens peck their eyes out. They don't have those versions in The Golden Books.

Another example is very restricted and implied children that one finds in today's social science textbooks of child development., These are by and large small rational beings who as a result of proper parental attachment and teacher reinforcement or disequilibration make their hygienized way from sensory motor operations to formal operations, from a morality of pleasure to one of conscience and from a trusting state to of one of integrity unless they fall by the wayside into some kind of abnormality or delinquency. But as the editor of a new Handbook of Children's Folklore (in press), I find that there is a side of childhood which seems to have been excluded from this kind ofrational textbook, and therefore from orthodox modern conceptions of childhood. Thus the topics in our Handbook cover such items as: ghosts,
verbal duelling, obscenity, graffiti, levitation parties, pranks, automobile lore, autograph verses, puns and parodies, initiation rituals, urine and excrement play, toilet lore, panty raids, fire play, food fights, jokes, sex play, insults and jeers, skits, camp songs, scoff lore, hazing, forts, oral legislation, guile, riddles, nicknames, calendrical customs, telephone jokes, fartlore, kissing games, superstitions and so forth. Apparently there is much that goes on in childhood which is simply excluded from the texts as being considered an essential part of childhood. The child in children's folklore, on the other hand, seems to be very different from the child in a psychology textbook . And the major difference is that most of the child's folk play has been excluded.

Or to take another example ,when I collected stories from children in a study some years ago I thought that the discovery of these stories would be a revelation to everyone, and that they would be so excited they would proceed immediately to make use of them in education. For example,in a

number of places I have attempted to show that the poetic stories of the very young have a distinctive form of organization and that this can be used to assist our understanding of children's writing, reading etc. Samples of these early stories can be found in my book The Folkstories of Children (1981).

Of course I was quite wrong in this. These kinds of narrative play are generally cut out of the curriculum because they sometimes show no respect for conventional values; they subvert sense with phonic nonsense, they can even be suggestive, indeed perverse, and they tend to resist the structural character of the hero tale which with its beginning middle and ending has become our dominant narrative form. We don't comprehend them and we don't like them, so we simply exclude them.

My point is that we have denied both the meaning and character of play by excluding most of it from either the children we control or from our own consciousness of the children we control.

EXCLUSION BY SUBSUMPTION

What I mean here is that by calling play something other than it is we have reduced its meaning to something else. This tendency is pervasive since the Romantic Movement's conflation of play and art and moral idealism at the beginning of the 1800's, in, for example, the German writings of Kant and Schilling and the English poets, Wordsworth and Coleridge. Since that time play has taken on various other moral guises all of which are positive. There is certainly no Rabelaisian modern theorist of play at least within academia, although I have applied personally for the Chair.

So play gets to be defined as growth or adjustment or cognition, or problem solving, or mastery or exploration or imagination or creativity. Groos, Freud, Piaget,Bruner,Erikson, Berlyne and Singer join hands around the altar of its adoration but in doing so they idealize in a variety of different ways. Freud and Piaget while not quite dismissing play give it a mainly repair or consolidative function thus lining up with Plato who also saw it as a secondary epistemology. In the light of anthropologist Barbara Babcock's recent etymological analysis of play terms as having largely female gender linguistic roots, one could argue that the secondary epistemological role given by both Freud and Piaget to play might be read to suggest that their's is a view of play as a largely feminine, because secondary, undertaking. Contrasting with this are the quite intrusive theories of play like those of Erikson and Berlyne which emphasize mastery and exploration respectively. They are the Horatio Alger kinds of theory. Bateson of course we would give a 10 for having feminist elements (the stress on primary process) and masculine elements (the stress on secondary process, in particular the hierarchy of communication and metacommunication). The point of all this, however, is that all modern theories, female or male in root metaphor, see play in one kind of positive light or another. They all suppose play to be functional, when in fact, as there is an abundance of animal, historical and anthropological evidence to show, play is often dysfunctional, and dangerous to life, limb and morality. (Sutton-Smith, 1961). Play is neither good nor bad in itself I believe but may be more usefully thought of as a system of communication used by both animals and humans for a variety of purposes, which are little hinted at by modern psychological theories of play with their modern cultural presuppositions and limitations of focus usually upon child subjects in

laboratories, nurseries or playrooms. In all of these theories the rough nature of play as it often manifests itself throughout history is effectively denied. Take for example the modern tendency derived from Schiller to think of play as a special instance of human freedom. Ignore if you can the need of the romantic movement to emphasize freedom in contrast to the omnipresence of industrialization, of urbanization, and the mass character of the emerging national states. In some sense one might argue that our current increasing emphasis on play today, or on Please Touch today are similarly paradoxical flags of the very opposite. Freedom in romanticism is a kind of hysterical reaction to conformity and authoritarian control as well as it is a positive virtue of modern individualism. Perhaps we emphasize play as freedom today because what really concerns us is the children's enslavement to the television and consumer world. In 1800 Wordsworth said that "love does not easily thrive, in cities, where the heart is sick." (McFarland, 1985); and with similar romanticism we might say today that "Play does not easily survive in front of the television set where the brain is asleep." But in fact of course we are as much slaves to our play as we are free in it. We are driven by our metaphoric keys (Burke, 1966) and can often imagine no mental health without that paradoxical engagement. Not to be so passionately committed is to be merely idling. And further if our play is to be social often, especially when young, we must accept as companions those who will hassle us, scapegoat us, deny us the choice roles and often be persons we would have nothing to do with if they were not keys to that passionate space. Often we would rather die than be left out. What freedom indeed is this.? It is more akin to addiction than to freedom. And if the child's teachers offer to free him or her from their subjection they may

well tell them that we "are only playing". They would rather be a member and a subject than be saved.

But we have in our century subsumed play to our cravings for leisure, to our idealizations of childhood and to all those psychological processes which we have come to regard as of first line importance like problem solving and creativity.

DENIAL BY SANITIZATION

What is separately denied by being excluded or subsumed or sanitized is not all together clear. I have already, in effect, evoked all of these instruments of denial. My last now is the sanitization of play not through subsuming it to some theoretical principle, but through identifying play with a variety of other "cleaner" human functions. Briefly these are exploration, mastery, problem solving and imagination, all of which are admirably embraced within modern notions of child achievement. By calling all of these activities kinds of play, we can contend that play by itself makes a notable contribution to modern knowledge over and above more explicit forms of child training. By saying play is the child's work we can convince ourselves that this apparently trivial or nonsensical activity is actually a form of learning, or if we are more wisely cynical we can keep off those other more narrowly cynical parents who contend that it is not, and say that their children should get down to the business of learning as soon as possible.Meaning learning to read and write. But whether our conglomerate definitions of play serve to mislead the ignorant or to save play from the puritans, they are all further forms of denial and they have the practical consequences that kinds of play that are

not so clearly labelled as being educational are ignored and excluded. Children of course will always be intelligent and will explore their environment, they will attempt to master it, they will solve its problems and they will imagine its alternatives. But none of these need be play though all of them sometimes are. One can simply imagine, or one can imagine playfully. The two I see as quite different. And I want to separate the two so I can save the playful form for childhood and for myself, and not have it sanitized out of existence by mislabelling.

CONCLUSION

Practically speaking I wish to save some part of the quotidian day for children to play by themselves or together largely without supervision. Children today are more solitary than at any time in history and need other children more than they ever did before. They live often in a toy-TV culture of solitariness and sometimes of loneliness. Their toys are presumably the prototypes of their object related individualism and achievement; their soft teddy bears which they will ultimately bring to College with them are their items of transitional emotion (Sutton-Smith, 1985). For many the only place left for conspiracy is their solitary bedroom. But what we all know again and again is that when they have access to each other they drop all of this and conjoin in these playful and paradoxical involvements of animalistic passion. And for most, if not all, it is these intense involvements that they remember in later years and that they associate with their own subsequent zest for living and their desire for life itself. It is possible to support a thesis that to fail at play in childhood is to fail at life itself and I suspect that the same thesis could be applied to adults. At least we know that the reverse is true, that

often those who are failing at childhood cannot play either systematically with their own fantasies or by conjoining their fantasies with those of others. Clearly there are indeed weighty emotional and characterological matters at stake here.

From which it follows that those who would hot house children, if indeed that does mean the denial of adequate play opportunity ,may well be taking the zest out of childhood and contributing to that pallid kind of intelligence which characterizes many of our depressive fellow citizens. Though I would not want to oversimplify seeing there are often as good causes in later life for that as there are earlier.